

The Promise

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Summary: I showed you the meaning of true friendship, and you taught me the importance of brotherhood. I know I have a sister, but you are so much closer to me than she is or possibly can be.

***Chapter 1*: The Promise**

Sometimes, I do wonder why I followed you around. Why did I cling on you as if you were the only person in Weyard I could depend on? Why didn't I leave when dangers time after time told me I shouldn't be with you? Why didn't I go home when you kept rejecting me and telling me I'm a noble scholar and not a brave soldier?

It's still a bit of a mystery for me today. All I know is that I am still with you, and still want to be.

I followed you out into the unknown. Never did I hesitate to follow your commands in battle, and never did I leave your side. Most times, I'm more trouble than help. Most times, I'm more burden than relief. Yet, you pull me up to my feet after I fall, and you hold my hand when the path becomes too dark.

I showed you the meaning of true friendship, and you taught me the importance of brotherhood. I know I have a sister, but you are so much closer to me than she is or possibly can be. You were the person who taught me to look at my abilities as a blessing. You were the one telling me to remember all the brave things I've done. You took me into your embrace when I had nowhere else to go and you held me close despite the lies I've told you.

We haven't always been best friends though. I remember when you used to complain about my lack of practical skills. You hit me over the head if you caught me asleep on watch, and threatened to leave me behind when I slowed down your journey. I used to look at you with sadness, wondering why you despised me so much. But then, you keep giving

me hope from time to time; a tap on the shoulder, a smile, even in sarcastic way.

Perhaps I just made a big deal out of something unintentional. Or maybe I misinterpreted your words and actions, but I was desperate for company after my father was imprisoned in Lunpa and I was too much of a coward to return to Kalay.

I've never had any real friends before. Back in Kalay, my friendships had always ended with heartache. Even the closest friendship I've ever forged didn't last because of what I am; a telepath—a mindreader. Eventually, I came to accept that I'd live and die in solitude without anyone by my side.

Remember the very first time we met? That was in Vault.

I was matched against those terrible thieves. I was so lost and alone in that town. It was the first time I've gravely disappointed my father. He even struck me for my failure and he left me behind. I ran around, doing what I did best—trying to track down information about my father's stolen goods.

I was startled when you approached me and tapped me on the shoulder in friendly gesture. You were so kind and soft-spoken. I like that in a person. You gave me a brief smile and told me not to be afraid. You told me you were just like me—you also had those mysterious powers. I was curious about you. I was curious about who you were—and why you would want to help me when I couldn't offer you any reward for the trouble.

You said people like us needed to stick together. I was so relieved that I finally found someone who didn't fear me, or judged me because I could do magic.

Yet, when I revealed to you what I could do, you changed your mind, so hastily that your very action left a permanent scar in my soul.

You took your promise back, called me a telepath, a spy; an agent. And then you left.

I wept; I was devastated and heartbroken, but deep down, I could only blame myself for my misery. I should have known better—who in Weyard ever stayed with me once finding out I was a mindreading demon? You shouldn't be any different. Just because you were a sorcerer like me, it didn't change the fact that you were a simple man with his own personal secrets.

I was used to it. I was used to being alone and used to people calling me things worse than agent and spy; people have called me a demon in disguise. Yet, when *you* called me a spy, it *hurt*. Because you gave me hope, and then you took it all away. I felt so helpless when you left me all broken in spirit.

I'm usually not a rash person, but I was desperate after you left me. I just wanted to go home. I wanted to reclaim my father's treasure and go home and hide my miserable face behind the palace walls. I should've waited for the promised escorts to arrive. King Hammet would rather want his fosterling back in one piece than receiving a magical artifact back from a messenger of Vault. But I didn't want to be a failure. I didn't want to repay Father with nothing when he had given me everything Kalay had to offer.

So I went after those thieves—alone. And I demanded my father's treasure back. I was foolish. Of course, they laughed in my face. Of course, they gave me a harsh beating. Why would they give up the opportunity to teach the annoying

aristocrat a lesson? They would have put me in a sack and thrown me in the river if you didn't walk in on the scene and rescued me.

Although you healed the damage done to my body in minutes, the harm to my soul was permanent—I will always remember this moment of humiliation. I was broken in body and spirit. I didn't move and just stared at the dirt on the streets. But then you pulled me into your arms and began frantically saying my name and apologizing.

You said it was your fault I got beat up. You said you wanted to help me get my heirloom back so that I could go home. You're one of a kind. You'd do so much for this strange boy you didn't even know.

I wanted to know your story, and being a Telepath, I learnt of the truth quite soon. It had its price, but I don't think we'd be this close if I hadn't broken my promise to you that day.

Maybe I'd never been out on this journey—maybe I'd be telling stories about you in Kalay instead; "Oh, there was this arrogant wizard who helped me in Vault. He wasn't very nice as a person." Maybe you'd never had come this far on the journey. Or maybe, you'd have found another Adept to help you—someone who wasn't a lying telepath or a novice who failed so many times.

I read your mind. It happened right after that encounter with the thieves. You looked so sad and upset when the authorities told you the ones you pursued had already left Vault. You didn't notice that I stepped closer to you. You didn't notice that I drew upon my Psynergy. You didn't notice me listening to your thoughts until Gareth pointed it out to you. I was surprised—because you said you could detect me

—but apparently, you must have your guard up in order to see the spell.

Maybe you still hold it against me that I read your mind that day when you were weak and exposed, but I didn't do it out of spite. I did it because I *cared*. You looked so sad and upset and I wanted to know why; I just wanted to quickly find out how I could best help you. And I discovered so much—about your very important quest, about your past, and about you as a *person*.

You broke my spell, abruptly. There was a pain stinging my head and I felt dazed for a moment. In the next second I felt something wrap around my neck and push me up against the wall. It was you. With your gloved hands, you held my throat and pressed me against the wall. You leant menacingly over me, and your shadow covered my small frame. You stared at me with such hate. Your hands on my neck trembled. You didn't choke me, but you didn't have to.

I was terrified. I'd never been so scared in my life. I pressed my hands and arms against the wall and closed my eyes and tears trailed paths down my cheeks. I've seen people do all kinds of things in a fit of anger, and I knew this was a betrayal that cut you deep. I've seen what you could with your magic from the fight earlier and I was terrified of what you might do to me. I knew I had to choose my next words carefully, but the only words I could manage were "mercy" and "please".

Still, you released me in shock, horrified of what you just did and could've done to me.

And I ran. I ran away in fear with my newly recovered heirloom. I wanted to forget the whole ordeal. I wanted to forget I ever met you. I wanted to return my heirloom to

Father and then go home to Kalay. So I ran off to Lunpa, where I had been told my father had headed. But I couldn't even enter the city. The gates were locked and guarded. I tried to sneak. I tried to bribe. I tried to threaten. But everything was fruitless. The gatekeepers saw me as a little trouble-maker. They didn't believe I was the Prince of Kalay. They told me to go pester someone else; to go do something useful instead of fooling around.

I rode back on the road to Vault, and I felt useless and weak once more. I didn't know what to do. I couldn't return to Kalay without my father—the king. Everyone would blame me for his capture.

Then, I remembered *you*. Without another choice, I decided to seek your help again. I knew quite a lot about you after reading your mind, and I hoped that I could pursue you to help me a second time.

You'd headed west, so I raced you westward. I thought of you and your quest, and I wondered how much was truth and how much was childish daydreams. Saving the world? The idea was so bizarre, almost laughable. I did, however, believe you tried to restore your honour and seek redemption for your crimes. You were just like me, charged with a task to recover a treasure you'd lost. The memory I viewed was a bit of a blur, but I saw you kneeling in front an altar. I saw those powerful men surround you and question you. And I heard you lay your vow of reclaiming the relics you'd lost.

You arrived at the Goma Range, just as I'd predicted. But the idea of asking for your help was lost once I saw how angry you were over seeing my face. After what you did to me in Vault, I was afraid of your tendency towards violence. I couldn't bring myself to ask for more favours. You thought I

was there to blackmail you with your secrets, but I had put all my hopes in you. I was starved and tired. My horse is gone. I didn't have a single breadcrumb or coin left—I *needed* you to help me.

So I lied again. I made up an excuse just to be there, if only to eliminate the suspicion on your mind. I said I wanted to help you, because... you helped me. It was a desperate lie, and you saw right through it. You laughed at me. You pushed me so easily up against the mountain wall. You pointed at me, and told me to take a look at myself.

"You dress in velvet and gold," you said, "You're a prince, not a warrior. You're the one who needs help and not me!"

I shook my head, but I knew that you spoke undeniable truth. I felt cornered and small—powerless once more. Yet, you kept taunting me for being completely useless to you as a companion.

It seemed to be a hard thing to prove—my worth. I wanted to tell you I could track your enemies' location from the townsfolk. I wanted to tell you I could find information from people who won't give. But I didn't. I knew better than reminding you about what I was. But I did clear the roadblock as you demanded.

You looked at me, reluctant to accept defeat, but you let me come along, being a man of your word. Again, I gave you the promise I'd never read your mind ever again—the promise I could never keep.

Throughout the whole journey, I wasn't much of a travelling companion. After being useful that once at the Goma Range, it took a long time until you saw me performing any miracles again. Sometimes, I could tell that you even regretted taking me with you. Sometimes, I even regretted not leaving you in

Bilibin and returning home; I was a coward who'd rather be a burden to you on your journey than crawling back to face the music in Kalay.

I collapsed on the road to Imil. You made me walk such long distances without a break. Of course, all you saw in me was weakness. Time after time, you criticized my work and inability to help. I was saddened by your harsh words, but I could only blame myself for growing up in a palace. I never needed to walk longer distances—I usually rode or travelled by carriage. You had to carry me when my feet were chafed and you had to keep healing me every night. You complained, but you still carried me on your back, which made me believe that you did care about me despite your words. So I promised I'd be better, and I *tried*, but I didn't succeed very well. Most of times, I ended up putting myself in danger and you had to rescue me.

You never said it, or even thought it. Yet, I blamed myself for stalling your journey, which later led to your failure at the Mercury Lighthouse. Perhaps you could have prevented the light if you had arrived earlier. Perhaps you could have stopped Felix and the temple robbers if I'd been more useful in magic combat. I was craven, and I was a diplomat; not a fighter. I was a spy, not a warmage; I didn't even know I could conjure lightning before you showed me.

I remember when you held my hands and taught me. You taught me the spellwords and the gestures. You taught me how to channel Psynergy into destructive forces—how to create lightning, how to summon storms, and how to aid you in combat. I asked you curious questions about Psynergy, and you patiently taught me all the things you knew.

I trained as much I could. Every evening I'd feel weary in both body and spirit, but I wanted your acceptance so badly

that I didn't care how hard I had to work for it. The fact that I was so persistent probably won you over as your frustration with me vanished and turned into protectiveness. When I was cold, you'd hold me and keep me warm. When I was tired, you'd carry me. When danger approached, protecting me became your highest priority. When I told you I had nowhere to go, and began silently crying at the thought of how I'd failed my father, you took me in your embrace and told me you'd take me with you to Vale and give me a home. That was both the strangest and most wonderful thing someone had ever offered me. I read your mind, wondering what hidden motives you might have, but I found nothing of that kind...

You wanted me to be safe. You didn't want me to be alone. You wanted to give me a home... with you.

I was moved to tears. And I felt even guiltier for being a useless burden. I wanted to be an Adept like you. I wanted to be one of you. I didn't want to be the boy who tagged along for adventure and couldn't even contribute anything to the team. I tried my best to be a useful sorcerer, but my best just wasn't good enough. In the battle atop the Mercury beacon, fear overwhelmed me and I misfired, shocking you into paralysis with a lightningbolt. You yelled at me and told me to back off, but it was too late. The enemy didn't hesitate to strike me down.

You wanted to kick me out of the group after that event. You felt it was your responsibility to protect me and safeguard my life since you allowed me to join your mission in the first place. You didn't want me to get hurt again; at least, you didn't want me to die on your account. But kindness was what led to your failure, or so you claimed afterwards. You'd been too weak and soft-hearted, you said.

Of course you cared about me. If you didn't, you wouldn't have repeatedly thrown yourself in harm's way to protect me. If you didn't, I wouldn't have caught you asleep on a stool next to my bed after the battle. You were more injured than I was, yet, you were there clutching my hand so tightly, waiting for me to wake up.

But despite your noble intentions your words were sharper than swords.

You said I was useless. You said there was no purpose for me to stay around. You said I could not fight, I could not heal, I could not travel, I could not hunt, I could not cook—you said I could not do anything you wanted me to do. You said the only thing I could do was stalking in people's minds, and that skill didn't justify all the disadvantages of having me around.

I wanted to die that moment. I had never felt so unworthy and unwanted before. But you being you... of course you regretted what you said. Of course you took me back after remembering I had nowhere else to go.

I spent half of the journey proving my worth to you. I did my best to be a perfect friend and ally to you.

There was a big argument in the cursed city of Kolima. You wanted to move on and leave the people behind while Mia and Gareth wanted to save them. They demanded your resignation from leadership, but you refused, claiming your decisions were for the greater good. The argument escalated into a fight. Mia and Gareth beat you up, so you walked off to sulk. I wanted to comfort you, but you didn't want my pity and yelled at me. Mia, who'd also taken a liking to me for the same reasons you did, dragged me away, but I did look back to you as we left.

We didn't wait for you before having supper. Mia said if you weren't ready to apologize, you might as well make your own food tonight. When you returned to the inn it was all dark. You dragged your feet upstairs. You looked so broken. I'd never seen you so down-spirited before. I wanted to help you in some way, so I went to the kitchen, sliced some bread and heated up the leftover soup for you—that was the least I could do.

You were frustrated and angry when I found you in your room, but your anger wasn't directed towards me for once. You were staring at a map on your table and banging your fists against it. I entered with your food tray and told you to eat while it was warm.

You drew out a chair and sat down, letting out a deep sigh. You were tired and you drew the food tray towards you without complaints. I glimpsed a smile from you, and although it was a sad one it definitely wasn't fake. You lifted the spoon and scooped up some soup to taste, but then you abruptly dropped it. You lifted your gaze and looked at me with confusion and then suddenly asked why I was so nice to you.

I didn't know how to answer that question—how does one answer such a question?

"You pity me, don't you?" you then said. "You read my mind, right? *I don't need your damn pity!*"

You angrily told me to get out of your sight and I ran away as quickly as I could, but I didn't really leave. I remained outside your door for a moment and peeked. You sat at the table, with your face in your hands, shaking your head. Then you swept your hand over the table and knocked the food-tray down on the floor. And after that, you slammed your

forehead against the table and covered your head with your hands.

I'd seen you broken several times during the journey. Sometimes you got drunk too, much to Mia and Gareth's irritation. Seeing you like that hurt me. I wanted to comfort you, but I knew I couldn't. With Mia as your rival, and Gareth supporting her, you didn't want to appear weak. You *knew* you weren't leader material, but you insisted to lead just because you didn't want to follow *Mia*; had it been Gareth taking over, you'd have stepped down any day. You should've just swallowed your pride and let Mia lead. She probably could have worded it better, but she was right: She led a clan and a temple—you didn't. She was born and quickly moulded into a leader while you were just a peasant with a sword. It wasn't *kindness* that was your weakness. It was *pride*.

Because of your pride, I couldn't tell you what I did to make our journey across Lamakan Desert possible. Even with my new Psynergy, we still needed equipment to survive the journey—I couldn't just "Reveal" a river for us to swim through the desert. You were so stressed. Even if you weren't our recognized captain, you were definitely our quartermaster. You handled the finances and provisions and you knew we'd run out of money and barely had enough to buy food.

I thought you'd break if you failed here. I didn't want to see you hurt because you think you need to prop yourself up as a strong and mighty warrior when you in fact were just a lost child at heart.

As much as I hated the idea, I still went to Master Feh and requested his aid—Father used to do business with him in the past. But Feh wouldn't help me for free. He didn't want

to risk his honour for a foreigner so I had to give him my jade pendant—the only key to my unknown past, in exchange for him to vouch for me in front of the bankers of Xian.

I kept it a secret. I made Feizhi deliver the money and asked her to lie that her father helped you because you saved her cousin. I didn't want to hurt your pride—if the useless child in the team upstaged you at this moment you'd take it badly and I don't want to get on your bad side. I've grown comfortable in your protective shadow and I wanted to stay.

You were so proud the next day we left the city with our new equipment. It was good to see you smile again. But by the end of that desert adventure, I fell unconscious. It was serious sunstroke. You saved me using the Water of Hermes. The first thing I saw when I awoke in the oasis was *you*. You held me so close to you in the middle of the pond, relieved to see life flicker in my eyes again.

I was dazed and confused. I asked what happened. And somehow I turned your relief into anger. You pushed me away, and yelled at me for being so careless. You said I was an idiot for not speaking up when I was tired. Saddened, I questioned why you even saved me to begin with, if I indeed was so worthless in your eyes. You said you didn't want to be responsible for my death, no matter how useless I might be. Then you grabbed one of your spare tunics and threw it in my face, telling me to get changed before I got sicker. For once, I refused doing your bidding. I deserved better treatment than that. I did so much for you and yet you had to put me down for my physical shortcomings.

That just made you angrier and you began tearing at my wet tunic, telling me I was a brat and that you regretted not ditching me in Bilibin. You hurt me so deeply so I wanted to hurt you back. I yelled at you and said you were selfish and

only cared for yourself. You screamed back, telling me you'd lost so much sleep because of me and that you'd made countless sacrifices for my comfort.

Our argument instigated another fight between you and our other companions who couldn't believe you'd mistreat me after what I'd done for you in Xian. They didn't know I'd kept you in the dark, and you were dumbstruck when Gareth told you I was the reason we could even continue the journey.

You didn't say a word to me for the whole evening, but at night you caught me falling asleep on watch and with my blanket catching fire. I didn't even wake up and you saved me twice on the same day. But I did wake up when you moved me into your tent and tucked me in. You were back to being kind and protective of me again as if the fight never happened. You touched me so gently with your hands. You stroked my hair. You wrapped your extra blanket around my body to keep me warm.

Still being indignant about never getting an apology, I reacted badly to your kindness. I said the things I knew would hurt you most. I accused you of using me. I accused you of actually not caring about me at all. I said you were nice to me just so you could feel good about yourself for being mighty and strong. I said you rescued me because you needed my Psynergy to get out of the desert. I told you I was just a tool to you. And I didn't realize I was crying until the barrage of insults was over.

You apologized. All you said was "sorry." You were at loss, and you sniffled, trapped in a tent with me with nowhere to run. That was the first time you let me see you cry. And I regretted saying those horrible things I didn't mean and apologized too. I could see you wanted to embrace me, but were afraid of rejection. You're not like Gareth or Mia. You

Speak with action rather than words—your hands trembled and you tried to not reach out to me physically.

We sorted out our misunderstandings that night. We talked about everything we never resolved in the past and forgave each other for the mutual dishonesty and selfishness. At the end of the conversation, I was hugging your head against my chest and you were finally letting yourself cry properly.

I bluntly asked you why you built those walls. Why you made yourself look so heartless and cruel. You're good person. You're kind and compassionate. Why were you so insistent on shedding what made you beautiful as a person? You tried too hard to be a cold leader. Why? Was it because of what happened in that terrible storm? When you decided to grow up and stop being a boy? Was it because the eruption of Mount Aleph left dark stain in your spirit? Or was it because your best friend betrayed you?

You didn't reply immediately, and you looked so sad and thoughtful that I couldn't help myself. But you suddenly tightened your hold around my chest, startling me and making me ashamed for trying to read your mind again. I ran my fingers through your hair the way you did when you consoled me. I didn't know what else to do. Or what to say. I use Mindread to find out how to deal with people; I don't like to chance. But for the first time I *didn't* want to read your mind and I didn't know why. It wasn't because I was afraid of being caught this time—I knew you wouldn't push me away at this point.

Then, you broke the silence. As if you knew all along I'd been secretly using Mindread on you before, you told me you envied me. You said it was unfair that I could just have a peek inside someone's head whenever I was unsure, while you'd never know if someone lied or not. You said Felix

betrayed you and hurt you to the core and that your wounds are still open and bleeding. You said Felix used to be like me—kind, frail, gentle, and unyielding in his ways of showing affection. You said he meant so much to you—that he was your *brother*, and that you could not even properly hate him even after what he did... You said you didn't know what to feel when I displayed my devotion to you—because I kept reminding you of the friendship you'd lost.

I could relate; I had felt the same. Knowing your friends had moved on or thrown you away, yet you hope they'll come back to you one day, and tell they'd missed your company. But they never do, and it hurts. You want to move on, but you're afraid to give away too much only to be left with nothing once more.

I kissed the top of your head. Usually, one wouldn't need to say it aloud, but I felt the need to say it to you. I asked you if I could be your friend. I promised I would never betray you or leave you behind. You looked unsure, yet hopeful. And I understood that you once again hesitated because I was a telepath—I knew everything, and you knew nothing—I could lie and you wouldn't know.

So I entwined my little finger with yours and repeated my promise. I even promised there would be no secret between us. You laughed. It sounded more like a hiccup, but I was happy that my childishness made you a smile. After a while, you gave me another promise. You promised you'd never hurt me again. You promised you'd protect me, and that you'd be my most valued friend.

I've never had so much faith in a friendship before. Your bold words gave me so much hope. I wanted to believe in you. I really wanted to believe in a friendship that could last longer than just a few years.

I saw the brother I always had wanted and needed in you the moment you drew me into your warm embrace. But sometimes I still think you're scary. And it is because you can be so gentle and kind, yet turn so cruel and cold. You make me feel special, and I like that very much. Sometimes, you do make me feel small. People say I'm childlike, that I don't look my age. Which is true, but I only felt like a child when you treated me. And I let myself enjoy it, as if I was trying to compensate for the childhood I never had. My adoptive father forced me to grow up early, so I don't remember having a childhood full of laughter and play.

We failed to find Lemuria. And we even lost the trails of Jenna and Felix. Yet, you wanted to keep sailing. You showed me the jade pendant I had left in Master Feh's hands. My mother bought it back and entrusted you with it when we visited Kalay. Because she wanted you to help me find my real family.

I said I didn't need to find them, but you insisted, so we changed course to sail westward.

And there, we found out they were alive—Jenna and Felix. You reverted to your moody rash persona again, determined to hunt them down—How could they keep running away from you even after you told Felix on the Venus Lighthouse that you were there to save them? At least, you were better at controlling your emotions now and refrained from offending strangers who might assist us.

In the city of Contigo, we found my roots, but none of my family members were left to call me son, grandson, brother or even cousin. The only thing I had left was a sister who also had been sent away to be raised by strangers. I didn't mind though. I said I had a father and a mother—King Hammet and Lady Layana were my parents and they were

more than enough for me. Then, I also had *you*, but I didn't say that aloud. And calling our personal quest finished, there was just one task left—and that was to bring the Traitor of Vale back to face justice.

The confrontation was messier than expected. Atop the Jupiter beacon, I failed you again as a comrade in battle. You're an excellent swordsman and Adept, and a masterful duellist. You fended off the enemies while I secured Gareth and Mia to the ledge with my Psynergy. We could have won the fight too, if I had not been the weak link. Our enemies realized they couldn't best you, so they attacked me instead. One mercilessly chased me with her weapon, while the other kept you trapped with spells. Enraged, you called them names and cursed them. You told them to get over there and fight you. You ploughed your way through flames to reach me, but it was already too late. I was exhausted and I fell to my knees. Yet, that our enemies felt the need to finish me off with yet another fiery spell and slam my useless body to the ground.

My fall became your fall. If you only hadn't flinched upon seeing my miserable fate, you wouldn't have been caught off guard and defeated. They laughed at you, those godless scums. They said you were no warrior—that you let me distract you from the fight. They were about to take the Mars Star from you, but they hesitated. Of course. They had tasted your fury, and they knew you would do *anything* to win. A wounded and desperate animal was a dangerous thing, after all. You would fight to your last breath of air. You would throw them off the tower or even attempt destroying Mars Star if that's the only way to prevent them from claiming the prize.

It was then Felix arrived and demanded you released—never mind me, of course. And the enemies who'd cut us down

demanded the Mars jewel in exchange for our lives.

Mia and Gareth, still trapped on a ledge below us, outright refused the deal. They said it was trickery—they said this trade couldn't possibly be any different from the one at Venus Lighthouse.

Hearing that, our enemies stomped over to me and pulled me up by the collar. They threatened to break my neck if you didn't comply with their wishes. Being the craven I was, I couldn't help but weep helplessly and I hated myself for it. My life was nothing compared to the fate of the world, but faced with imminent death, I could only sob and cry. I didn't want to die. I'd promised Father and Mother I'd return to Kalay and be the son they'd wanted me to be—I didn't want to die.

You gave the Mars Star to Felix, at least symbolically giving up your important quest. After receiving what they wanted, the thieves threw me onto the floor like a ragdoll. Mia and Gareth called out my name, and you gasped and crawled over to me. You drew me into your arms, ignoring the rest of the world. I was so weak and battered that I couldn't even speak. Your heart beat so loudly against my ear that I couldn't hear anything else. You stroked my cheek tenderly, and brushed my dry and broken lips with a thumb.

And that was the second time you let me see you cry.

Gently, you carefully entwined our little fingers, giving me yet another promise. But this time, you vowed to take me home. You promised to safely return me to my parents in Kalay. You said I should be living a happy life as a carefree little nobleman and not being beaten half-dead in this battlefield with you.

But I just smiled weakly and curled up to you, ignoring the smell of metal and burnt fabric and enjoying your warmth. I've long decided to stay by your side no matter what and I haven't changed my mind. You'd given me everything I thought I could never have. You're the best friend I could ever have. You're the brother I've always needed and wanted. I wanted to be with you until the very end.

And that's why I'm here near the ruins of Vale in the refugee camp, despite that Piers had offered to drop me off in Kalay earlier. I wanted to see you find your happiness too. I wanted to see the closure of your journey. And it saddened me that your dream of returning to an easy idyllic life in the mountain village was shattered.

When we drank for a last time on the hills, you told me you'll have to move to Bilibin and start a new life with the aid of a distant relative. I wanted to tell you that my offer still stood; I'd offered you a place at my side in Kalay when you thought you'd committed patricide in the north and was terrified of returning to Vale, but I didn't bring it up. You didn't accept my offer in your most desperate hour, so I doubted you take up my offer after you've decided to go with your mother's plan of starting over in Bilibin.

Many carriages have gathered in the camp and Piers's regalia was loaded. Today is the day we say farewell; to your village, and to each other.

Vale won't rise from the shambles. Your people will leave Mount Aleph and the ruins of Vale. Gareth says his family will move to Kolima. Felix has distant relatives in Bilibin willing to help his family. Sheba is already gone with Farans well-timed escorts. Mia will return to Imil. And Piers wants to drop Felix and Jenna off at eastern Angara before going separate ways.

And I, I'll be here, waiting for Father's men to escort me home to Kalay. They are late as usual, but I am fine on my own now. You've made me stronger; you've helped me grow so much. I feel much braver than I felt when I was stranded in Vault a year ago. For that I thank you and I wish you good luck on your next journey. I wish you good luck with your life and I hope you'll find the happiness you deserve.

This time we part, I don't know when we'll meet again. I don't know what awaits me in Kalay. Some of the refugees told me Father wants to make me his heir. That sounded rather crazy, but those people probably didn't know any better since most of you Valians have never left your secluded village. This is why I'm worried about you going to Bilibin. If you came with me to Kalay, I could make sure you'd be set for life... you deserve that after everything you've been through.

I smile when I see you and Garet board the ship, but I feel tears stinging my eyes. Why? Why am I crying? I should feel happy for you. I should go to you and hug you and say goodbye. But instead I'm crying and refusing to see you for a last time.

Because I know that I won't be able to leave if I neared you again. I don't want to part from you. I trust you; I trust you will remember me. I believe we'll stay friends forever, despite that we are apart. But I don't want to part from you, my closest friend and brother. I wipe the tears and watch Piers's ship take flight. Secretly, I wave you all aboard goodbye from where I stand on the road. I jump back when a few carriages pass me, carrying families who would start a new life in Vault. Then I look back to the camp for a last time. Only a few people are left, waiting for distant relatives to pick them up. A few minutes later even those people

climb up on carriages and leave too, and I'm the only one left.

The sunlight is still strong in the autumn evening and I sink down to the ground on side of the road. I wonder if Father has forgotten to send escorts for me. The refugees said they did send a message to Kalay. I sigh. I arise from the ground and look towards the gilded road.

As said, I'm fine on my own now. I can walk home by myself.

Suddenly, a closed carriage runs past me and blocks my way. The rude coachman immediately snarls at me in an obnoxious tone:

"There you are, Princey! I've searched the whole camp for you!"

I look up at the coachman, who happens to be a certain goldsmith I am *not* friends with, and I frown. Out of all people, my father just had to send *this* person to pick me up.

"Don't call me that," I tell the coachman.

"Get in the carriage or walk home by yourself," he snarls back.

"You're paid!"

"I haven't received a penny! If my father didn't tell me to pick you up too, I wouldn't care if the wolves got you! Now *get in the carriage*, I don't have all day!"

I grumble about his rudeness and arrogance and vow to complain to Father once I'm back to the palace. I had hoped for a comfortable and easy journey home, but with this person as coachman, I'll probably have much nonsense to

hear. I open the door to get into the carriage, but to my surprise I find *you* there with your parents.

"*Surprise!*" you say with a radiant smile and playfully wave at me. Your parents smile too and ask if I am the soul-mate you spoke so highly of.

I don't know what comes over me. I feel so relived, and so happy. And unable to stem my emotions, I throw myself in your arms and embrace you tightly. You pull me inside the carriage and close the door. You don't want to let go, not caring that your parents are watching us. The carriage starts moving and you trip back into your seat. When you pull me up to your lap, I hug you again. I don't care that people are watching either. I just want you to know I love you. I say it to you; I whisper those words into your ear. Yet, I feel how the tears well up in my eyes and blur my vision again. Because I don't know if that really was the right thing to say.

I shyly look at you. You look surprised. Not disgusted or embarrassed, just *surprised*. Your hands stay firm on my back, gripping into the cloth that is my cape—once it had been fine silk cloak, but now it was just a big rag held together with mismatched patches and crude stitches. I look away, the situation getting embarrassing in all of a sudden when you're silent. But then a gentle smile tug at the corners of your mouth, and then you *laugh*. Not stupidly or in an embarrassed way, but heartily and *joyfully*. You hold me, and you pound my back a few times.

"Ah ha-ha," you keep laughing, "I love you too."

I feel horrible. I just bared my very soul to you and you're laughing?—Thinking I'm telling you jokes?

"I'm *serious*," I squeak, not sure if I should just force myself out of your embrace or not.

You pull me away slightly, still keeping me on your lap—it's harder now, since the carriage is moving faster. You've stopped laughing and I am on the verge of tears. I feel nervous, even scared. When you kiss my forehead, I look into your cornflower eyes. You're smiling, still as joyful as before.

"Me too," you say. "I thought you *knew, little brother.*"

Your mother pats me on the head, and your father chuckles. I guess neither of them knows I'm sixteen, since I'm so small compared to you. I put my arms you again. And I weep.

"I thought you left for Bilibin," I say, "I thought I'd never see you again."

You chuckle, and then you reveal to me you had relatives in my hometown. The obnoxious goldsmith driving the carriage was your second cousin on your mother's side.

"Besides," you add and show me your pinky finger, "I promised to bring you home, remember?"

I smile as you finally let me slide off from your lap and take a seat next to you. I ask you what you plan to do now when your quest was over.

"Don't know..." you say, shrugging your shoulders. "We'll find my relatives first. Then I'll... try finding a way to feed my family. I'd probably become a mercenary for hire, since I'm not an artisan and don't know anything about business."

"Isaac," I say, "I'll help you... I don't think I can ever repay you for everything you've done for me... but now when I can help you, I want to... I want to help you start anew in Kalay. I know you don't want my money, but my offer still stands; I can give you a place at my side. If you think that's too much

I can still help you find a place to live. I can write you recommendations and such things. If you ever need any help, just say it. I'll help you."

You smile and raise your right hand showing me your little finger.

"Is that a promise?"

I loop my pinky around yours.

"Yes."

It's dark. The crescent moon shines on the night sky.

Isaac looks out from the carriage, gazing at city gates of Vault. It had been a long time since he visited this town. The cousin driving the carriage starts ranting when he finds the amount of refugees seeking shelter—it would be a long wait before they could enter the city.

"Hey Dear Cousin, Saviour of the World, how about we skip town? I don't think Princey wants to spend a night in a rundown inn anyway."

Isaac doesn't know if it was a serious consideration or an excuse to insult his friend.

*"Joke's on you if you fall asleep driving!" he finally says.
"We're all Adepts here so we'll be fine in case of a crash, but I don't know about you."*

The cousin doesn't reply, and he doesn't drive away either. And Isaac realized he'd managed to shut his cousin shut up without yelling or threats of violence.

"Son, you've changed," says the father.

Isaac smiles and looks at Ivan, who sleeps with his head resting on Isaac's shoulder.

"Yes."